

The case of John Hinckley

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By Thomas Szasz

John W. Hinckley, Jr., the man accused of shooting President Reagan, is now being studied' by psychiatrists. According to press reports, his 'tests' may take up to three months to complete. President Reagan was shot, hospitalised, tested, treated, and released, all in less than two weeks. Thus, the mere length of time seemingly necessary for 'examining' Hinckley lends weight to the impression — implied, asserted, or simply taken for granted by mental health experts and others — that Hinckley is indeed sick. Hinckley's parents, who may perhaps be forgiven for tilting the truth, spoke with what seemed to me arrogance when they said: 'We simply ask that you realise John is a sick boy. . . ' But John Hinckley's alleged sickness (presumably 'mental') is not like cancer, that a person may have and not 'realise' (or not want to 'realise') that he has. Hinckley's parents also asked that we join them 'in prayers for our son John.' Since I do not pray, I must decline the invitation. But I must add that I find the idea of people praying for a person who tries to assassinate the President distasteful, to say the least; and I find the idea of people, especially Jews, praying for a seemingly unrepentant Nazi also distasteful. But then we live in an age in which right and wrong, guilt and innocence, are hopelessly confused, especially by psychiatrists. For example, *Time* magazine quotes a Harvard psychiatrist, Thomas Gutheil, referring to Hinckley as a 'victim' of a disease — 'erotomania' — manifested by 'obsession with celebrity.' Crime is a disease. Punishment is a crime. The criminal is a victim. And America, poverty, and, of course, mental illness are the 'causes' of everything that interferes with unremitting human happiness. Consider these typical comments about Hinckley.

William Buckley (who should know better) writes: 'John Hinckley, like the killer of Allard Lowenstein, is for all intents and purposes as inexplicable as Mount St Helens, and probably as un-

controllable.' Not so. John Hinckley is a person, a moral agent. Mount St Helens is a part of the earth's crust, a mountain. Hinckley is easily controllable: that, indeed, is what he had obviously asked for, back in Nashville and perhaps earlier.

Anthony Lewis compares Hinckley to other Presidential assassins (including those who killed Lincoln, McKinley and Kennedy), considers them all obviously insane, and concludes — comfortably and no doubt comfortingly — that the 'attempt on President Reagan was in the historic mould of derangement.' Jane Brody assures us that 'nearly all [Presidential assassins] were mentally unstable,' and supports this by explaining that 'psychiatrists have emphasised the schizophrenic personalities of American assassins.

Carl Rowan counsels sympathy for the parents, taking it for granted that the would-be killer is sick since he 'has been a drug abuser [and] . . . has been under the care of a psychiatrist.' *Newsweek* speaks of Hinckley's 'lunatic mission' and of a public unsafe 'from the fantasies of madmen.' Alas, if that were all we had to fear.

Since several prominent commentators have casually coupled the assassination of President McKinley and the attempted assassination of President Reagan, I thought it would be interesting to see whether McKinley's assassin had been examined by psychiatrists, and, if so, what they had found. Believing that, if we want to, we can learn from history, I herewith offer a brief account of the encounter between the man who killed McKinley and the experts who examined him.

Leon F. Czolgosz shot President William McKinley in Buffalo, on 6 September, 1901. He was tried on 23 and 24 September, the entire proceedings occupying only eight and a half hours. Found guilty by the jury, Czolgosz was sentenced to death on 26 September and was electrocuted at Auburn

prison (about 20 miles west of Syracuse) on 29 October. The time that elapsed between the murder and the execution was less than eight weeks.

In January, 1902, the American Journal of Insanity (the official organ of what is now the American Psychiatric Association) published a lengthy report of the case by the principal defence psychiatrist in it. Entitled 'The Trial, Execution, Autopsy, and Mental Status of Leon F. Czolgosz, Alias Fred Neiman, the Assassin of President McKinley,' the report was written by Carlos F. Macdonald, M.D., Professor of Mental Diseases and Medical Jurisprudence at the Bellevue Hospital Medical College, and included 'A Report of the Post-Mortem Examination' by Edward Anthony Spitzka of the College of Physicians and Surgeons. All subsequent quotations are from this article.

'There are many persons,' wrote Macdonald, 'who are disposed to hold that the enormity of such a crime is in itself sufficient evidence to warrant the opinion of the existence of insanity, merely because it seems to them inconsistent with the principles of rational conduct . . .' Denying that this is so, he instead urged upon his readers the view that 'medical science [now] holds that the whole question of responsibility should rest upon the presence or absence of mental disease and not upon a knowledge of right and wrong as regards the nature and consequences of the act in question . . .

In keeping with this belief, Czolgosz was closely studied by five psychiatrists, three appointed by the prosecution, two by the defence. Like many defendants charged with the murder of a political figure, Czolgosz did not want to be examined by psychiatrist. This did not prevent them from finding Czolgosz to be mentally healthy. He also objected to being represented by court-appointed counsel and wanted to plead guilty. He was, of course, forced to plead not guilty and received a defence that consisted, according to Macdonald, 'mainly of an apology (by the chief defence counsel, a former judge) for appearing as counsel for the defendant and a touching eulogy of his distinguished victim . . .' The jury brought in a verdict of guilty in less than half an hour.

On the morning of 29 October, 1901, the Superintendent of State Prisons assembled with several prominent New York State officials, among them Macdonald and Spitzka, to witness Czolgosz's exe-

cution. During the preparations for the electrocution, Czolgosz 'addressed himself to the witnesses in a clear and distinct voice in the following significant language: "I killed the President because he was an enemy of the good people — the good working people. I am not sorry for my crime. I am sorry I could not see my father." The Warden then signalled the electrician to close the switch, sending the first charge of current through Czolgosz's body. A few moments later Macdonald — the principal defence psychiatrist! — ordered the electrician to make a second contact 'as a precautionary measure'.

The experts who have spoken out on the Hinckley case and who have compared him with Czolgosz have all asserted or implied, as if it were an obvious 'fact', that Czolgosz was mentally ill. Carlos Macdonald thought otherwise. He ended his report with this conclusion: 'The writer having reviewed the case in all its aspects, with due regard to the bearing and significance of every fact and circumstance relative thereto that was accessible to him, records his opinion unqualifiedly that Leon F. Czolgosz on September 6, 1901, when he assassinated President McKinley, was in all respects a sane man — both legally and medically — and fully responsible for his act.'

The grisly scenario of proving Czolgosz sane was still not over. Less than an hour after Czolgosz was led into the death chamber, his body lay on the autopsy table. The post-mortem examination was performed by Spitzka under Macdonald's supervision. After reporting that the autopsy findings were negative and apologising for not finding any evidence of 'insanity' Spitzka concluded: 'Why not rejoice at the occasional discovery of a — I will not say normal — but nearly normal anatomical subject, instead of resorting to misanthropy to deprive us of so rare a consolation?'

And therein lies the final irony of the psychiatric study of the Czolgoszs, Oswalds, and Hinckleys — ante-mortem and post-mortem, with or without 'examining' the subject: that regardless of whether the 'diagnosis' is sanity or insanity, it is a lie.